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ABSTRACT

Whether by state mandate, institutional initiative, or the requirements of accrediting bodies, community colleges and other institutions of higher education are giving increased attention to assessment and evaluation. In the region accredited by the Middle States Association (MSA) of Colleges and Schools, for example, several community colleges have implemented novel approaches to institutional evaluation. Genesee Community College (New York) and Middlesex County College (New Jersey) have adopted a cyclical program/service review process, using outside evaluators appointed by the MSA in consultation with the institution. Nassau Community College's (New York) review model focuses on the outcomes of the teaching/learning process, recognizing faculty as the key managers and practitioners of program review. Delaware County Community College (Pennsylvania) was one of the original participants in the American College Testing Program's College Outcomes Measures Project, and continues to use and improve this assessment model to evaluate student outcomes. Monroe Community College (New York) has developed a practical and readable fact book, which documents collegewide outcomes related to the fulfillment of specific goals and objectives. Dundalk Community College (Maryland) is currently undertaking a "Study of Learning Excellence" as a substitute for traditional accreditation self-study and evaluation processes. As a final example, New Jersey's community colleges use a state-mandated multidimensional program of outcomes assessment. Though community colleges are making progress in the assessment process, they must continue to develop their research capacity and adopt appropriate strategies for the assessment of student outcomes and institutional effectiveness. (AJL)

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While the assessment debate continues at all levels in higher education and words like "excellence", "quality" and "effectiveness" are swirling around this monstrous, not yet fully defined or understood topic, the still youthful community college is coming to the rescue! Precisely because community colleges still are not excessively burdened with too many traditions and "sacred cows," they have generally found the assessment movement to their liking. To be sure, these uniquely American peoples colleges have always had to justify their existence, constantly explain their role and mission,

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and document the value and quality of their endeavors in relation to their four-year college and university counterparts of (at this point in their history) "peers".

Community colleges have always welcomed the opportunity to be introspective, to examine basic assumptions, and to look to the future. These opportunities--often including assessments of effectiveness--have been at both the national and local levels. The first major assessment at the national level was Gleazer's Project Focus in the early 70's. Also in 1971 the editors [1] of a comprehensive tome on two-year institutions underscored the need for assessing institutional effectiveness in community colleges by including the following statement in the introductory section of the volume:

> Educational accountability requires that community colleges show evidence of quality in what they claim to do. Only by self-analysis and self-appraisal can community colleges use their emerging potential for leadership in American Education.

More recently, such a study was chaired by Ernest Boyer [2] of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Learning.

These colleges that I have known personally as a faculty member, department head, academic dean, ombudsman, AACJC staffer, and accrediting official have always been the innovators, trailblazers, change agents, and entrepreneurs in our vast cornucopia of higher education. With few exceptions, they have not been strangers to that which is new, that which was ignored by other sectors in academia, or that which seemed too futuristic to other more traditional pedants.

Other movements, particularly in the last twenty-five years, have either been developed fully or have been adopted and pursued fervently by the community college. Whether one examines systems incorporating the systems approach, behavioral objectives, cognitive style mapping, mastery learning, management by objectives (MBO), or strategic planning, the common thread for the community college sector has been its responsiveness--and often proactive stance--to change and innovation. More important, the adoption of these strategies was more often than not a serious effort to assess institutional effectiveness, to improve program performance, and to enhance instructional modalities and student outcomes. This has been particularly true of the implementation of management information systems, institutional research operations, and strategic planning approaches by community colleges. Thus, the concept of assessment is not new to the community college. What is new is the stepped up pace to find more effective instruments and approaches to assess student learning. In that regard, we have all become more actively engaged in the search for

better institutional effectiveness criteria and the most appropriate alternatives for assessing both institutional and student outcomes. And while community colleges and other postsecondary institutions have recognized the need for a multidimensional approach to the assessment of effectiveness, there is a growing trend among these colleges to move beyond the more traditional studies involving follow-up studies of graduates, employer perceptions, placement results, and the like. In addition to these measures the community colleges have implemented assessment programs involving quality assessment at all levels, systematic reviews of academic programs and services, longitudinal studies, and comprehensive planning process tied to budgetary requirements.

Whether by state mandate, institutional initiative, or the requirements of accrediting bodies, most institutions--including community colleges--are giving increased attention to all types of assessment. These assessments include mission review, program and curricula evaluations, administrative and faculty evaluations, facilities utilization studies, longitudinal studies of students and alumni, enrollment management, environmental impact studies, community impact studies, financial and management audits, among others. With regard to our own standards, the MSA Commission on Higher Education has for many years established the following in its "Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education" [3]:

> The **curricula** should be under constant **evaluation**, with modifications being made as changes in educational or other needs of society may require. Provisions should be made for systematic review and assessment of courses and academic programs.

In the Middle States region alone several novel approaches to curricula evaluation tied to institutional effectiveness come to mind and are worth presenting as case synopses. These involve Genesee Community College, Middlesex County College, Nassau Community College, Dundalk Community College, Monroe Community College, and the New Jersey Community College System.

In the case of Genesee Community College and Middlesex County College an alternative to traditional institutional self-study and evaluation known as the cyclical program/service review process was adopted. If you were wondering about the more recent involvement of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in the evaluation (not revolution yet, mind you) of the outcomes assessment phenomenon, I played a major role in the development and implementation of a process that requires more indepth study and evaluation of all programs, disciplines, and administrative and support services annually on a five-year cycle.

The process, which relies on external program assessors appointed by Middle States in consultation with the institution, also takes into account the need for attention to "global issues" affecting the entire college or university but not covered specifically in the discrete program/services reviews. At the conclusion of the five-year cycle, a summary assessment of the previous reviews is done to determine the institution's effectiveness in responding to its own planning priorities as well as to the chief recommendations flowing from the plethora of self-studies and the annual assessments provided by the chief program evaluator assigned for the duration of the cycle. Finally, the review of all of the documents associated with the process results in an institutional accreditation decision by the Commission on Higher Education. Since an institution's participation in the experimental process was predicated on an essentially acceptable accredited status, the overall outcome is not in doubt and the institution can concentrate its energies on making improvements and desirable changes.

But even though this approach being used in selective institutions in the experimental phase is a substitute for regular self-study and evaluation protocols, modified approaches not involving accreditation directly have been adopted by numerous other community colleges in the Middle States region. However, the inclusion of an external reviewer component has meant that most of the institutions involved in the

cyclical program/services reviews have requested the Commission's assistance in identifying qualified faculty and administrators to perform the review function. That these processes are tied into institutional planning procedures is further evidence of the commitment of the community college sector to the assessment of institutional effectiveness and outcomes.

The case of Nassau Community College is special in that it was successful about five years ago in getting FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education) to support a major institutional effort in evaluating effectiveness--not on the scale of the large outcomes project undertaken several years ago by California community colleges but nonetheless substantial in terms of its focus on evaluating the outcomes of the teaching/learning process in the community college. This project, since underwritten by the College itself, differs from most other program review models in that it recognizes the faculty as the key managers and practitioners of program review.

In 1985 a Nassau/Middle States joint invitational conference on program/services review was implemented with the participation of seven other community college that had existing effective program review procedures or were in the process of initiating such reviews. The conferees debated the pros and cons of various ways to assess program and, by implication, institutional effectiveness. They

concluded [4] that program/services reviews should be conducted as part of an overall institutional planning process; and that such reviews should "address quality, not merely in terms of efficiency but also through assessment of educational outcomes." Since that time, Dr. Majorie Raab and Professor Thomas Fernandez of Nassau Community College have drafted several proposals that are awaiting approval for the development of a manual of assessment criteria to be used by academic faculty and administrators in community colleges. Of course, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education expects to play an important role in the development and implementation of such an institutional effectiveness guide.

We are fortunate also to have in our region one of the original colleges that participated in the ACT College Outcomes Measures Project (COMP); that is Pennsylvania's Delaware County Community College, an institution whose overall institutional effectiveness effort has for many years rested upon a competency-based curriculum. Because specific competencies for all programs are well defined and integrated into an institutional assessment model, some student or, at least, institutional outcomes are common expectations. That is not to say, of course, that the College is in a perfect state of bliss over its assessment efforts or results; it does say that the College in assessing effectiveness recognized early the importance of student outcomes. It is significant that the College has continued to make improvements in the utilization of the COMP battery of tests at a time

when other colleges are adopting these materials as primary outcomes measures of general education competencies. In effect, the current practices at Delaware County Community College are contributing to our understanding of the institutional effectiveness phenomenon and how we should respond to it. Again, a community college has been a pacesetter in this movement!

Through its institutional planning process Monroe Community College in New York has been successful in documenting institutional effectiveness in its fact book--a document that is not only replete with useful data on institutional characteristics and trends but also incorporates within its narrative style documented College-wide results related to fulfillment of specific goals and objectives. While such "fact books" are usually rather formidable and difficult to use, the results-oriented people at Monroe have transformed what could have been a boring document into what I have labelled "An Outcomes Compendium: A Practical and Readable Guide to Institutional Effectiveness."

Perhaps the most ambitious undertaking by one of the community colleges in the Middle States region is the "Study of Learning Excellence" currently underway at Dundalk Community College in Maryland and one that has been accepted by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education as a legitimate substitute for the usual self-study and evaluation processes. College President Martha

Smith in a recent letter [5] to the evaluation team chairperson described the goal of the continuous effectiveness Study in this way: 'to improve student learning through a comprehensive program for achieving institutional excellence in all aspects of our available resources, our organizational climate, and our outcomes and results.' With the strong support of the college community via a referendum, the Study got underway in 1986 and now involves ten (10) working groups examining "10 factors that directly and indirectly affect student learning at DCC: student readiness, curriculum, teaching, academic support services, administration, classified staff, co-curricular activities, governance, physical environment, and student services." In addition to revising the College's statement of mission, philosophy, and student goals, the steering committee for the project developed a procedures manual that incorporated a study approach that has enabled the College "to analyze, develop and implement a series of transformational strategies to achieve learning excellence in all aspects of the College."

So far, the Study has produced not only a wealth of important information on institutional effectiveness but has also resulted in a considerable number of recommendations that have been reviewed for conversion into implementation priorities as a part of the institutional planning and management decision-making processes. Because there has been early encouragement from Middle States, the

College is comfortable in the knowledge that their internal assessment program "is consistent with the aims of the Commission and that the Study of Learning Excellence represents the kind of continuous process that the Commission is fostering."

Finally, the community colleges in the State of New Jersey are involved in a multidimensional program of outcomes assessment mandated by the New Jersey Department of Higher Education, which has been developed in consultation with the colleges and with the assistance of the Educational Testing Service. However, two-year institutions in New Jersey such as Burlington County and Brookdale Community Colleges, with modified mastery learning approaches, were already well along in their approaches to the assessment of institutional effectiveness.

These brief institutional references are but a few examples of how community colleges in the Middle States region continue to respond aggressively and innovatively to the quest for excellence and as contributors to a better understanding of outcomes assessment. As early as the late 1960's when the Commission had a discrete set of guidelines for two-year institutions, there was an explicit statement on outcomes (then referred to as "Evaluation of Results"). And though there has been an increased emphasis on compliance with the existing criterion on outcomes, the commitment of the Commission and the 500 institutions it accredits to the assessment of outcomes and

institutional effectiveness remains clear. The revised statement [6] that has emerged from a year-long review of standards is as follows:

> The deciding factor in assessing the effectiveness of any institution is evidence of the extent to which it achieves its goals and objectives. The necessity of seeking such evidence continually is inescapable; one of the primary hallmarks of faculty, administration, and governing boards is the skill with which they raise questions about institutional effectiveness, seek answers, and significantly improve procedures in the light of their findings. The approaches need be neither elaborate nor solely dependent on mechanical means, but they should be thorough, persistent and self-sustaining. An institution should be able to demonstrate that the information obtained is used as a basis for ongoing self-renewal. The process through which faculty and staff conduct such analyses can be beneficial, morale is enhanced by positive results, the public is assured of the level of performance, and areas found wanting receive attention.
>
> A plan for the assessment of outcomes should include a multidimensional evaluation of scholastic achievement using qualitative and quantitative measures. The basic

process begins with a thorough review of each institutional program, curriculum, course, or other activity. Tests and other measures carefully used can help to discover the progress of students in the mastery of subject matter, development of skills, logical precision, ability to apply knowledge, and global awareness. Efforts should be undertaken to assess student achievement in general as well as in specialized areas of the curriculum, on an inclusive as well as course-by-course basis, and when possible in comparison with student achievement elsewhere. Institutions should make frequent appraisals of the academic progress and goal achievement of their students, of the records of their graduates in education beyond the two or four-year college level, of surveys of alumni opinions, and of reports solicited from employers. They should not depend wholly on any one indicator but should weigh all evidence of expected results that did or did not occur.

Although program reviews which demonstrate how graduates of an institution are integrated into the larger society are important, the institution should not lose sight of the educational process and its effect on student conduct and attitudes. The institution should seek ways to assess the degree to which

students' attitudes, social and ethical values, interests, and commitment to scholarship change as a result of their education.

Outcomes studies, if they are to be most productive, should accumulate useful data for institutional research and development. They can be directed at the fiscal and planning aspects of an institution as well as at its educational programs. A measure of an institution's sophistication is its use of data generated through the self-study process and its application to sound planning and resource allocation. Colleges and universities that include research, scholarship and service as major institutional purposes will assess effectiveness in these areas with the same thoroughness they evaluate learning outcomes.

As you will note, the statement is not prescriptive but is a more general mandate concerning this important criterion.

I would like to conclude by suggesting particular areas in which community colleges should either initiate or improve their assessments of effectiveness, including some that were highlighted in a futurist

study on community college research needs by William Deegan and Dale Tillery. These include: 1) review and revision of general education requirements; 2) revitalization of faculty and staff resources; 3) strengthening of services to off-campus programs and part-time students; 4) the development and adoption of stronger and more equitable criteria for trustee selection and more effective programs for their orientation and development; 5) enhancement of articulation programs with elementary, secondary and other postsecondary institutions; 6) development of improved longitudinal studies of students; 7) improvements in the recruitment, retention and graduation rates for minority students as well as the assurance of comfortable learning environments for all students; and 8) more widespread use of research findings as a means to improving the teaching/learning process. Deegan and Tillery [7], for example, state that "[c]ommunity college staffs must make more concerted efforts to assess the outcomes of various approaches to developmental education." They also stress the need for "more sophisticated research on how program impacts differ by student learning style and subject matter and on the potentials and limits of technology in developmental education."

Finally, I would like to underscore what one of our community college representatives on the Commission, Flora M. Edwards [8], wrote about several years ago in an issue of the Community, Technical, and Junior College Journal:

> We in the community colleges need precisely what most of us do not have--the research capacity to develop models to truly assess our output. We need the ability to define more clearly what is working and what is not, to measure student progress against fixed criteria. We need to be sure we have adjusted our strategies, not our standards.

The Commission on Higher Education will continue its expectation that all accredited institutions adopt appropriate strategies for the assessment of student outcomes and institutional effectiveness. However, the Commission is convinced that carefully devised longitudinal studies having faculty input will provide ultimately the most effective means for judging institutional effectiveness and student outcomes.

NOTES

1. Edmund J. Gleazer, Jr. and Jane Follett Cooke (Eds.), American Junior Colleges, Eighth Edition, Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1971, p. 10.

2. Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation directed a major study focusing on the future of the community college in the 21st Century.

3. MSA Commission on Higher Education. Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education. Philadelphia, PA: CHE/MSA, p. 8.

4. CHE/MSA-Nassau Community College "Invitational Conference on Program/Services Review Summary." Unpublished Report. Philadelphia, PA: CHE/MSA, April 1985.

5. Martha Smith. Letter from President Smith of Dundalk Community College (MD) to Dr. Joseph N. Hankin [Team Chairperson], President, Westchester Community College (NY), concerning "Study of Learning Excellence Project." Philadelphia, PA: CHE/MSA, July 1988.

6. MSA Commission on Higher Education. Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education

7. William L. Deegan and Dale Tillery. "Toward a 5th Generation of Community Colleges." C,T & JC Journal, April/May 1987, Volume 57, Number 5, p. 37.

8. Flora Mancuso Edwards. "The Transformation of Undergraduate Education." C,T & JC Journal, December/January 1986-87, Volume 57, Number 3, pp. 34-35.

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